

Abstract of the Disclosure

An electronic document retrieval system and method for a collection of information distributed over a network having documents stored in web or document servers in which an access control list relates user identification to documents to which a user has access. No access control lists are contained in the documents themselves nor are comparisons made between lists of users, with their access levels, and the classifications of documents. Rather, by the use of URLs or pointers, it is possible to associate every document to which a user has access with the user identification number or code. URLs have a hierarchical format which allows partial URLs to indicate levels of access. HTTP protocol, FTP and CGI protocol employ URL calls for documents and can use the access control method and system of the present invention. When a search query is applied to a query server, a list of hits is returned, together with pertinent URLs. The query server consults each access control list associated with each document server, to present to the user only those URLs for which he has a proper access level. Other URLs for which the user does not have proper access are kept hidden from the user.